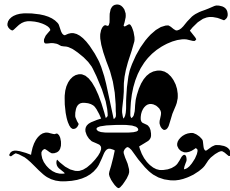


ONLY BEAUTIFUL
&
OTHER STORIES



KERRY LANGAN

Wising Up Press Collective

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MAKEOVER

Mrs. Turell has new magazines on her coffee table. The covers say things like: "Get Back Into the Dating Swing," "Life After Divorce," and "How to Know if You're Ready To Commit Again."

I've been baby-sitting Gretchen and Andy Turell for almost two years, since before Mrs. asked Mr. to move out. The magazines on the coffee table used to read, "Keeping the Romance Alive in Your Marriage," "Rediscovering Intimacy After Childbirth," and "Holiday Makeover for Your House!"

Now Mrs. Turell is considering using her maiden name, Canfield, after the divorce is final. "But the children," she says to me, "it might confuse them. They've gone through so much already, I don't want to burden them with one more change." She asks me to call her Janet, and lately I've even been calling her Jan.

She looks young for her age, early thirties, I guess. Her blonde hair is almost down to her shoulders and she wears dangle earrings. She's thin, although she always complains about her "saggy tush." I think she's beautiful, like the pictures of women in *Vogue*, and I wonder what she looked like at my age, fifteen.

The last time he drove me home, Mr. Turell asked me what I thought of his wife. I looked at him and watched as his head rocked slowly from side to side. Maybe he had been drinking. Probably. When I didn't answer, he asked me again: "So, Barbie Baby-sitter, what. . . do you think. . . of my wife?"

I looked out the windshield, watching the road slip beneath the car. "She's nice," I said quietly. He laughed, but it was more like coughing. "Nice," he said, and I couldn't tell if he was serious. He shook his head like he was



LEAD US NOT

Even if he didn't sit in the first seat in the first row, every pair of third grade eyes would still have been on Michael Hoffman. He was smart; he had style. When someone knocked on the door, he rose immediately and swung the door wide open, his foot pointed forward, his head tilted at a jaunty angle.

"Why thank you, young man," the principal, Sister Christina, said the first time she entered. She smiled at our teacher, Sister Serena, and said, "Very impressive."

Sister Serena, a young nun in her early twenties, nodded weakly. Michael Hoffman was the reason she would sometimes retreat to the girls' room and return with red eyes, her hands clutching crumpled tissues. He was the reason she pressed fiercely on the beads of her enormous rosary, rolling the glassy black balls until her fingers must have ached. He was only eight years old, but Michael was more like an adult presence in our classroom.

He had all the confidence that Sister Serena lacked. He was handsome, with wide-set brown eyes and long black lashes. His smile, unlike many of his classmates, had no gaps, his permanent teeth already in. His height was emphasized by his upright posture. There was something intimidating about the width and height of his forehead, more prominent because his hair was short and combed back from his face. It made him appear older than the rest of us; I could imagine him with a briefcase going off to work each morning like my father.

Michael called out the answers before anyone had a chance to raise their hand. And he knew *all* the answers: the capital of every state, every



THE COMET

When Tracy, my older sister, started dating Clay, we all shook our heads in disbelief. He was this hot shot corporate lawyer pushing forty and she was singing with The Weeds, a rock band, every night at the Tralfamadore Cafe. Until Tracy met Clay, she used to sleep until noon everyday and get dressed sometime around five o'clock. She celebrated her twenty-first birthday last year by cruising every bar on Elmwood Avenue until they closed at four AM. Then she went to The Cat, a club down on Franklin Street that stayed open after hours. Tracy drank so much Wild Turkey that she fell asleep on the bar and had to be carried to her rusted Mustang and driven home by God knows who. At least she could never remember his name. "He did know how to drive a stick shift, Jake," she told me, as if that made everything all right.

So when Tracy showed up at our folks' house last Easter with Clay in tow, we all did a double take. My father didn't quite know what to say to him. Clay didn't look like the type of guy who could hold his own talking about dry walling, which is pretty much all Pop knows. Tracy must have told him I painted houses, though, because he handed me a card with some guy's name on it and said, "A colleague of mine. He needs a little work done on his summer home up in Algonquin Bay." Algonquin Bay's this ritzy summer place just over the border from Buffalo in Canada. I said thanks and stuck the card in my pocket.

Tracy's usual dates were musicians or bikers with names like Bones and Squirrel. Oh, yeah, and Hammerhead. I stayed away from that one. I hear he's doing time now. Clay wasn't a biker, now or in any of his previous lives, you could see that in a second. He was wearing a pinstripe suit and socks with those diamond things, argyles, on them. He sat in the living room and kept looking around, taking in the surroundings: the worn brown plaid sofa, the pea-green carpeting, the floral curtains that hung to the floor and then



A WORLD TRANSFORMED

Angie spoke quickly, repeating what Sister Michael Marie had said to her that day about the length of her skirt. Her mother set aside the *Time Magazine* she was reading and listened, her eyes expanding as her daughter spoke. Sister had kept Angie behind in the hall after the other students had filed into the classroom and explained, quietly but firmly, that even if mini-skirts were in fashion, this was still a Catholic school. Mrs. Reno, turning her gaze away from Angie, pressed her fingers to the skin above her lips and said, almost as a question, "Well, Sister understands you're not wearing mini-skirts, just that some of your skirts are a little short."

She looked at Angie, hoping for her affirmation, and Angie felt herself glow with recognition, a warm yellow light building deep within her chest and flowing into her arms and legs. Earlier in the week, her mother hadn't taken Angie's part when she fought with her brother Tony, two years older, about whether they'd watch *Bewitched* or basketball on television, hollering at both of them that if they couldn't share the TV, she was going to throw it out. And she'd been too busy to help Angie study for her geography test only yesterday. That's what she told Angie, but then Angie spied her simply sitting in the dark living room smoking a cigarette, the sliver of orange light at the tip growing suddenly brighter and then almost disappearing. But today, Angie felt herself to be correctly at the center of her mother's world in a way she hadn't been perhaps since her father moved out of the house last year and married Penny Stockton's mother.

"Saturday," her mother said after hearing Sister Michael Marie's observation. "We'll go shopping first thing Saturday morning." Then she went to Angie's closet and made her hold various dresses, jumpers, and skirts



TRYING SO HARD

My mother looks so butch with her hair cut like that, buzzed short so it sticks up in tiny dark spikes. She thinks it's funny when people tell her she looks just like me, her thirteen year-old son, but now I'm letting my hair grow out. But still, we're both chubby, especially in the legs, and we both wear wire-frame glasses.

I act like I'm cool with this whole lesbian thing even though my father asks, "How's Wonder Woman?" when he picks me up every Sunday. They divorced last year, after my mother told him that she faked every orgasm since their honeymoon. Some things I wish I didn't know.

At first I thought my mother was going through a phase, that she was trying out lesbianism like I was trying out roller blades. But when she went camping with Sandy, a school bus driver with a personality that ran every stop sign, it hit me that my mother felt the same way about girls that I do. Except she's getting dates and all I can do is stare at Kendra Mackelby's chest in math class.

In a few months, I'll graduate from Highland Elementary and go to Marshall High. I spend a lot of time wondering how different it will be, if the girls will be different, if they'll stop hiding their breasts behind their books when they walk through the halls. Both my parents keep telling me that I can talk to them about anything, anything at all. My father's idea of a conversation is a fifteen-second monologue where he says, "Don't worry about it. Things will work out, sport," regardless of the topic. He's a little insecure about his own sexuality since Mom's conversion; I don't think he has any advice to offer. There's no way I'll talk to my mother about girls because I know that she knows exactly how I feel about the opposite sex, and that embarrasses



MAN TALK

Because my father died in a plane crash when I was seven, Mother trotted out her brother, Uncle Jack, whenever some male rite of passage was about to occur. Not the usual male rites of passage, mind you, the big two-wheeled bicycle, the birds and the bees lecture, the keys to the car on prom night. No. Those were reserved for more conventional (and less affluent) families. I was a "Cameron Man" as Mother was fond of reminding me, and this meant legacies of all kinds to which I had to live up. Technically, I wasn't a Cameron Man since my father's last name was Renwick, but, alas, he was dead, and my mother fell back on her own family's traditions and customs to instill in me. And there was good old Uncle Jack waiting in the wings to make sure I toed the line.

That's absolutely untrue. He wasn't waiting in the wings. Mother was shoving him onto my stage with both hands. She insisted that he partner me in the father-son golf tournament at the club every summer, and that he teach me to swim, to ride horses, to row. Although Uncle Jack did all of these with a pleasant enough attitude, I knew Mother was behind it all.

I eavesdropped on a phone conversation between her and Uncle Jack when I was thirteen and about to leave for boarding school. Standing in the hall next to her slightly ajar door, I listened to a woman who knew how to get what she wanted:

"Jack? This is your sister, Margaret."

Reinforcing her blood relationship was always Mother's opening attack. Then she said, "Charles is about to leave for Philby Prep and he needs a word or two."

She was silent for a moment and I imagined that she was twisting the



MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

I've always been real proud of my feet. They're sitting up there on the dashboard of this old Firebird as we drive through the desert. Lou's flooring the gas, but we're only going about seventy; that's as high as this heap will go even on a good day. My feet can feel the vibrations from the rattling engine and the buzz from the radio as Lou keeps turning the dial trying to find a good song.

It's not just that my feet aren't too long and they're narrow with high arches like a ballerina's, though all those things help. It's the toes, really, that I've always, since I was a little girl, been convinced were something special. Those five pink buds on the right foot are identical to the ones on the left foot, even down to the way the pinky toes stand almost sideways. My big toes are really big, the pillow of skin behind the nails spreads out evenly on both sides and the curve of the nails is so friendly, it's like they're smiling at me. The big toes are the mother toes and they're each balancing four tiny toe children on their hips. And the smile never leaves the faces of those big toes; carrying around four little ones never seems to tire them out or make you think that those toe children are any burden at all.

We've been driving for five days straight and we're hoping to make Las Vegas tonight. I've never been there, but Lou says he's got a couple connections in the casino business. He'll get a job bartending in one of the clubs and maybe I'll be a cocktail waitress, and that will set us up good for a while. Until Lou gets itchy and wants to get back in the car and drive to Montana or Dallas or God knows where. I can't keep up with Lou's plans. Three weeks ago we were headed for Miami, but half way there, he changed his mind and we ended up in New Orleans. I think he likes the getting there



ETERNAL YOUTH

They say that of all the senses, smell is the one that can trigger memories of the past most easily. I believe it. When I was twenty, I was one of the perfume girls at Sheffield's, one of the nicest department stores in Toronto. Scents of all kind were a big part of my life then. Every week, I sprayed some new fragrance on the customers. Honey had the standard golden color of most perfumes, but it came in a little glass jar shaped like a bumble bee; you opened the lid by unscrewing the bee's wings. As clever as that was, the perfume itself smelled a little too much like bug repellent for my taste. It didn't do well. Sunlight was a big seller. It was a topaz-colored fluid, a browner gold than usual, and it had a spritely, open-air scent. I was supposed to say, "Would you like a ray of sunlight?" and then wave the bottle in a circle before squirting a customer. I only did that when a supervisor was walking by; I didn't want the customers to think I was nuts. My favorite perfume of all was Rain Forest, a deep emerald elixir that came in a concave-shaped bottle painted with little gold vines everywhere and a beautiful long-beaked bird with fuschia and yellow feathers. It smelled like overgrown grass in August after a strong rain.

Not every one wanted to be sprayed with perfume. Women looked past me, avoided my gaze, suddenly becoming engrossed with the floor pattern or reaching into their purses to locate their car keys. I would call out to them, "Would you like to try. . ." but they'd say "No thank you," so abruptly that I'd stop talking mid-sentence. That kind of rejection can get to you after a while, so I learned not to hound the women who quickened their pace when they saw me. Other women stopped, eager to see what I was selling, and I sprayed their wrists, telling them to wave their arms a bit so the



THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

John Hammond was amused by the food. Standing on his son and daughter-in-law's patio, he surveyed the vegetable skewers cooking on the grill. The colorful wedges of red and yellow peppers flanking little pillows of tofu were worthy of a photograph in a glossy magazine. The array of salads on the outdoor table included couscous and vegetables whipped up in a mango chutney, and a bowl of scissored cabbage marinated in a blend of citrus juices.

When Steve called to invite him to the barbecue, John had recalled such gatherings when he was about his son's age. The couples in their group ate hamburgers and hot-dogs, steaks when their salaries started to go up. Debbie, his former wife, used to make a macaroni salad with tuna and black olives that everyone was mad for. There was always a messy tray of condiments: ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, and pickle relish inevitably spilled. The highlight of the meal would be hot corn on the cob served with lots of butter and salt.

Taking in the couples in Steve's yard, John wondered how alike, how different they were from their counterparts in the late fifties and early sixties. In appearance, the men hadn't changed at all. Their pates were framed by bangs brushed back over their foreheads, the hair on the sides and back of their heads clipped short. In 1961, John was emulating President Kennedy's hair style; who was his son's crowd imitating? Their clothes made him nostalgic too, khakis and Oxford shirts, penny loafers.

The girls here tonight were dazzling. *Girls*, he'd get in trouble if he said that word aloud. Women, he reminded himself, they're women even if they're young enough to be my daughters. Every one of them was stunning

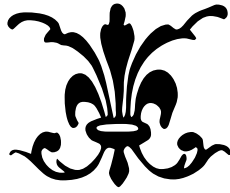


CITIZEN

At the end of every academic year, when the students pack up to leave Hancock College, there's always a bunch of junior faculty members preparing to leave as well. These departures have varying impact on those who stay behind. Least affected are the oldest professors. For several years their attitude has been, "Why bother to get to know the new kids on the block when they'll be gone before you know it?" Others wince; a particular senior assistant professor may have been a rising star in a hot new specialty, might have brought huge grant money to the College. These wincing professors are sometimes jealous; they wish they were up and coming, sought after by other academic institutions.

Personally, the exodus of the junior faculty each year saddens me; I always lose a couple of good friends. We'll stay in touch for a year or two, e-mail each other, text occasionally. Last summer my boyfriend, Daniel, a European historian, moved to New York to teach at Bard. We tried to keep the romance going but long distance relationships are doomed. After a year of intermittent visits and frightening credit card statements, we called it quits. I befriend members of the new academic crop each year but know that the friendships are probably short-lived. And each year, as I head towards my own tenure decision, I become closer to becoming one of *them*, the people who are anchored here forever.

Stefan and Natasha Tetrov were a little more exotic than most new couples in town. She was hired a couple years back as a senior assistant professor in the Soviet Studies program and he was her authentic Russian husband whom, it was rumored, she had married so he could get his green card.



ONLY BEAUTIFUL



Mary Connolly

The old women sitting behind me on this bus are whispering. About me. I'm used to it. I blink slowly, lift my chin and pretend to stare out the window. I've been holding my head high, too high, all summer. Today I went shopping downtown just to forget about things for a while. No luck.

It's my stop and I stand slowly, waiting until the bus is motionless before walking down the aisle. The whispering gets louder, a hissing sound that follows me with each step. I don't even know these women. They live somewhere in the neighborhood. But they know me, or at least they've heard my story. Through the grapevine. Everyone in the neighborhood knows all about what happened to Mary Connolly. Some think I got what I deserved, some pity me. A few, just a few, feel genuinely sorry for me.

I wish I had the nerve to turn around and glare, ask them, "Don't you have anything better to do than criticize an eighteen-year-old girl? Who are you to judge me?" But I don't utter a word; I just clench the metal pole as the bus lurches to a stop. The doors swing wide open and I step down onto Abbott Road, one of the main avenues that runs north and south throughout South Buffalo. I know every inch of it, from Park Edge Groceries to the LB Smith Plaza. South Buffalo has been my home my whole life. There are no secrets here. There are endless secrets here.



Joe Gleason

When we were little, I thought Mary was a blue jay, beautiful and mean. She sat across from me in kindergarten and barely said a word. Then one day, she asked me, "What's on your chin?" She traced an invisible line on her own face. I was sensitive about the scar. I'd had it since I was two and our neighbor's dog jumped on me and sliced my skin. That day in kindergarten, when I told Mary what happened, she screwed her face up like I was too



awful too look at. I don't remember her saying another word to me the whole time we were at St. Martin's School.

In junior high, she was in front of the building every morning, the other girls clustered around her, nodding as they agreed with everything she said. They knew they'd never be as beautiful as Mary, but they all vied to be one of her handmaidens, even Eileen, her best friend, who would easily have been queen bee at any other school.

I have to admit, Mary was irresistible that autumn we were in eighth grade. On the first day of school she wore a purple dress and stockings. Her long hair was the color of butter and her eyes were as turquoise as some of the marbles in my old collection. She looked like the models on the covers of magazines. I didn't gawk at her the way a lot of the boys did, but I stole a few looks. That short dress, those incredible legs. The sight of her made me ache.

Actually, a lot of the girls were knockouts that autumn. They'd come back from summer vacation with longer legs, longer hair, their make-up propelling them years forward. We boys were cowed by their make-up, by their short skirts barely covering bottoms that moved with a teasing rhythm down the halls. The best thing about Saint Martin's was that we didn't have to wear uniforms like the other Catholic schools. Sure, we were supposed to look clean and well-dressed, but the girls weren't hidden in those long ugly plaid skirts. Thank God.

These were the same girls we chased through the playground only a couple of years ago, but suddenly they were young women, leaving the boys in the dust. Their newfound beauty, so startling, was more wondrous to us than the moon landing. We could never admit this, of course, so we acted like a pack of idiots. Well, I was quiet, but most of the guys behaved like jerks. Timmy Corcoran and Mike Nelligan hooted, "36 D, DO IT 'TO ME!" whenever Molly Boyle walked by, her cheeks flushed, her eyes down.

Some of the girls were genuinely nice to us, like Sheila Adams. A couple others would say hello to you if you passed them on the street. But not Mary Connolly. You could be an inch from her nose and she wouldn't see you. She'd glide past me on the street and I felt like garbage.

I remember that first morning in eighth grade when I was up before my mother, stuffing my sheets into the washer, thrilled and horrified about what I'd dreamt the night before. For a few months after that, I wouldn't let myself glance in Mary's direction. I worried that if we locked eyes, she'd



Kerry Langan was born in Buffalo, New York, and completed her undergraduate and graduate education there. She had a career as an academic librarian before becoming a fiction writer. Her short stories have appeared in dozens of literary magazines in the United States, Canada and Hong Kong and have been anthologized often. *Only Beautiful & Other Stories* is the first book-length collection of her short stories. She lives in Oberlin, Ohio, with her husband and daughters.



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